

## Toward a New Kind of Collectivity in American Studies

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### **Introduction**

In her writing, Prof. Chow humbly claims her foreignness to the field of American Studies. In a similar manner, I must claim not only my foreignness too but also my ignorance in the fields of political science and cultural studies. But in a sense, it may be fitting that I, as someone foreign to those fields, comment on these papers. We gather here crossing disciplinary as well as linguistic boundaries, precisely because we desire to listen and learn from multiple perspectives. Through this, we hope to initiate the process of speaking, what Professor Chow calls, “a new kind of ‘we,’ a collectivity based on the ineluctability of heterolinguality, drawing from Naoki Sakai’s concepts. I hope that my perspective, as an expert outside of these fields, fosters the creation of this new kind of collectivity.

I must confess, however, that the task I was assigned was more challenging than I had anticipated. This is because the three papers were not only in three different disciplines, but deal with entirely different topics. Additionally, none of the papers focused on gender, the framework of this conference. If I were to attempt to integrate my discussion of the three into this conference framework, I would have to ignore the main points of each. Rather than attempt this integration, please allow me to comment on each paper individually, and from my non-specialist point of view.

### **I. Comments on Professor Mastanduno’s paper**

Professor Mastanduno convincingly argues that the U. S. is likely to continue to shirk multilateralism even after the Bush administration. I was among those who expected that the U. S. would shift its foreign policy back toward multilateralism again. I thought that the current Bush administration deeply hurt the U. S. in isolating the country from the rest of the world. This is the case not only with its invasion of Iraq but also with environmental and other important global issues. A shift towards multilateralism seemed to me a likely and reasonable form of redress.

If my understanding is correct, Professor Mastanduno's paper is especially significant in raising the following two points: (1) the Bush administration was not, after all, that anti-multilateral. The Bush team, like previous U. S. administrations, employed multilateralism whenever it thought that it would be more beneficial to U. S. interests. This can be observed in its commitment to multilateral institutions like the IMF and the World Bank, and its restored liason with NATO. (2) Even an Obama administration—if he wins the presidential campaign—wants to change the U. S. policy towards multilateralism; U. S. foreign policy cannot be as multilateral as they might desire. This is due to such factors as historical tradition and domestic economic stagnation, which make it more difficult to take such a course. Professor Mastanduno demonstrates very realistic analyses of the U. S. foreign policy from the past to the present, as well as shrewd speculation about the near future.

I would like to respond to Professor Mastanduno's argument with three questions. My first question concerns the concept of multilateralism itself. I agree that as Professor Mastanduno states, the US resorts so frequently to unilateralist foreign policy "because it believes it is powerful enough to get away with it" (p. 15). This power implies that the U. S. is exceptional in practicing unilateralism for this reason. If the U. S. is exceptional in that sense, the question arises—can we discuss multilateralism in the U. S. in the same framework as that of other countries? For other leading nations including Japan, foreign policy can be achieved most realistically through multilateral institutions such as the UN and G-8 summits. Thus, the question remains, is the multilateralism the U. S. employs for its own benefits the same kind of multilateralism as other countries practice, given that none of them, even relatively powerful ones, have the same level of world hegemony as the U. S.?

This leads to my second question. I wonder whether in the future, the binary between unilateralism and multilateralism will remain as valid as it has been in the past. It seems that in a sense that boundary is becoming more and more blurred as world geopolitics is changing dramatically to accommodate rapidly rising countries such as China and India. An example of this occurred at the Toyako Summit, which was held just a couple of weeks ago. There, the U. S. showed an ambiguous pose regarding the global warming issue. The U. S., alongside seven other countries, agreed to set the numerical goal of a 50 percent reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. In the process, Bush repeatedly claimed that it was indispensable to include China and India at the table where efforts to dramatically decrease the emission amount were being discussed. Here the U. S. effectively avoided concentrated criticisms against it for its reluctance to face the issue by pointing fingers at China and India. One way of interpreting this is to argue that the U. S. is disguising its traditional unilateralism, i. e. the U. S. does not want to take an aggressive action to stop the global warming. The other way of looking at this is that it is becoming more difficult for the U. S. to stay unilateral, difficult enough that it feels necessary to point fingers at the other "bad guys." Is this a

signal that the identity of the U. S. is shifting under global pressure? It may mean that the U. S. is no longer able to employ the unilateralism it once did, but does not wish to engage in a true multilateral foreign policy. Thus, it employs tactics that blend multilateralism and unilateralism, shifting the meaning of these terms.

I would like to pose a final question about the implications of Professor Mastanduno's work. I wonder, how will the rest of the world react to the U. S. if it continues to take unilateralism as its guiding foreign policy? Will the EU and other leading countries like Japan have no other choice but to maintain their forms of multilateralism like they have to now, or will they make a coalition to exclude the U. S. from their form of multilateralism?

## II. Comments on Professor Chow's paper

Professor Chow's interesting analyses of Kurosawa's two films, "No Regrets for Our Youth" and "*Rhapsody in August*", lead us to two sets of important questions. The first regards how the U. S. and Japan involved themselves in constructing the discourse of war and peace. The second set of questions regards how people in each society reacted to such discourses about war and peace.

It would be safe to say that "*Rhapsody in August*," produced in 1991, was clearly intended to address the heterolingual audience. It received harsh criticism particularly by American critics, many of whom claimed that its portrayal of the Japanese was one-sided. Specifically, they argued that Kurosawa portrayed Japanese people as "mere victims," ignoring Japanese aggression against Asia. It is said that two scenes in the film have been particularly controversial. The first is the scene of an atomic bomb memorial park where Tami and other grandchildren make a remark that the U. S. did not send a memorial to the bomb victims because it dropped the bomb. The second is the scene where Clark, her nephew from her brother and American sister in law, apologizes to Kane. I would argue, however, that such reaction blocks any metaphoric reading of the film. This reaction situates the atomic bomb as a mere "sign" that, for them, always must induce spontaneous reference to Pearl Harbor and Japan's invasion to Asia even in a 100 minute film. I do not think that any good artist or deep thinker would like that kind of straight-forward method.

Yoshimoto points out that this remark by her grandchildren is made only once in the film and there is no endorsement attempted throughout the rest of the film (2002: 366). The same goes for another scene where Kane's son and daughter, Tadao and Yoshie, accused the grandchildren of making a mistake by mentioning in their telegram to Suzujiro that Kane's husband died in the atomic blast in Nagasaki. The critics' reaction to the first scene amounts to a political charge that blocks any metaphoric reading of the film.

Needless to say, neither of the first two scenes, one at the memorial park and the other where Kane's son and daughter criticized their children for mentioning the atomic bomb, represents Kurosawa's interpretation of the war. The former

scene at the memorial park represents a typical discourse regarding Nagasaki's atomic bomb in Japan and a typical discourse in America regarding Japanese reaction to it. The scene where Kane's son and daughter criticize their children for mentioning the A-bomb presumably represents a set of discourses found in Japanese society on Americans' reactions toward the war and Nagasaki. It is for this reason that both scenes were not endorsed by another scene.

It seems to me that it was Kurosawa's intention to show in the first half of the film a heterolingual understanding of what "America" means among the Japanese, supposedly a homolingual group, and even within the same family.

For Kane's daughter and son, America is a country of wealth. For this reason, they approach their relatives in Hawaii in the hope of making a business partnership with them. With regard to the war, the scene where Kane's son and daughter criticize their children for mentioning the A-bomb in their telegram to Suzijiro in Hawaii presumably represents a set of discourses found in Japanese society on Americans' reactions toward the A-bombs. That is, any topic related to Hiroshima and Nagasaki should be best avoided in any conversation or communication with Americans. Even her family members did not understand the depth of Kane's sorrow about the loss of her husband to the atomic blast, was so deep that it inhibited her from visiting her own ill brother in Hawaii.

The situation changes, however, when the Kana family spent the summer with her. This culminates with Clark's visit to Kane to pay his respects to her dead husband. Clark breaks such stereotypes of Americans. He came to visit Kane to pay respects to her deceased husband. The family then starts to deepen their understanding of Kane.

It seems that Kurosawa navigates us through these scenes for a dual purpose. First, he aims to transcend the discourses involving war and post-war constructed in the closed space within each nation-state and some reactions toward these scenes. Second, he aims to anticipate and respond to the reactions, especially overseas, to these scenes, in order to raise a more fundamental and universal question regarding acts of war and the subsequent life-long wounds and sorrows of the surviving humans.

As for the final scene, Prof. Chow analyzes it saying: "it demonstrates that "defenses" are things that cannot and will not last?" (p. 26). In the final scene, rain is falling out of the dark-grey sky, and suddenly, a gust of wind turns her umbrella inside out. Is it possible to read this umbrella as a signifier to represent both a rose and the A-bomb mushroom cloud? It seems to me that the last scene refers to a couple of crucial scenes in the middle of the film: one where the camera zooms up the countless ants making a line to clamber up the rose stem; and, the other scene where Kane's son explains the meaning of a displayed calligraphy of an old saying in Japanese, "one can see deceased beloved ones again in the next world." It is unlikely Kurosawa included those two long scenes without any aim to refer back to them. Just like the ants moving up the rose in line, Kane's family forms a line to chase after Kane in the thunderstorm. One

way of reading the umbrella could be that it signifies strong love, that of Kane toward her husband as well as her family's' love toward her. Kane, who is confused and searches for her husband in Nagasaki, mistakes the lightning for the atomic bomb. The time in this scene moves backward, but in a sense, it points forward to a future that encompasses an anticipation of death. Kane's strong passion to call for her deceased husband did not diminish, even with Clark's wholehearted apology. However, the only way she can see her husband again is to go to heaven just like the old saying describes. That is why it seems to me that the umbrella in the lightning, which can be fatal as it charred the trees, also signifies the atomic bomb, implying her death to come. And the moment her umbrella turns inside out is the time when her life is about to finally be fulfilled.

Although my reading of the last scene may slightly differ from that of Prof. Chow, I agree with her insightful comments on the linguistic shift that likely indicates Kurosawa's implicit message about the universal rejection of war. Professor Chow convincingly makes this point by drawing attention to third-person narratives found in the dialogue between Kane and Clark.

The second film, "*No Regrets for Our Youth*," produced in 1946, is widely regarded as a GHQ's propaganda film to promote the idea of democracy in post-war Japan. In her analysis of contrasting "before" and "after" in this film, Prof. Chow highlights the contrast between the Western and modern life and the Japanese traditional life in a rural village, which is characterized by rice cultivation. However, the scenes before the war include one where Yukie engages in Japanese traditional flower arrangement. Therefore, it was not just Western and modern lifestyle before the war. Professor Chow does mention Yukie's bourgeoisie background, but I pay closer attention to the contrast between the prewar bourgeoisie urban lifestyle full of consumption and luxury and the simple lifestyle in the rural village, which focuses on nothing but production. Considering that the film takes place in 1946, when most Japanese were leading devastated lives, having lost everything and trying to start from the scratch, I question whether GHQ is trying to convey to the viewers the importance of intense labor and production. The village in the film is interestingly depicted as an egalitarian community without any hint of hierarchies, even though Yukie had to fight against severe prejudice and discrimination. It might have been that the GHQ desired such an egalitarian society for traditional Japanese rural communities and thus depicted them as such. Moreover, the final scene where Yukie was warmly accepted by the villagers after the war to become a heroic leader of the feminist liberation and cultural movement may reflect, in my reading, the GHQ's intention to depict how thoroughly and successfully the ideas of democracy and freedom spread throughout Japan even into such a remote rural village.

As some of the Japanese film critics have pointed out, Yukie does not look truly happy at the ending scene. I agree with their interpretation that Kurosawa embedded his resistance to GHQ in the final scene. There is, it seems to me, no

real hero or heroine in the film. Given the absence of a true hero, as well as Yukie's unhappy looks in spite of her achievements and the peasants' unnatural smiles, I would read this scene as conveying Kurosawa's strategic intention to claim that the *shutaisei* involving war crime is not something articulated with a simple frame of who is right and who is wrong.

### III. Comments on Professor Lee's paper

I am pleased to find that I share very similar academic interest with Professor Lee. Professor Lee's paper is particularly significant in pointing out the following: 1) It highlights multiracial Americans, a segment of the American population that is growing rapidly today; 2) it presents research results based on her interviews as well as her analysis of the 2000 census data; and, 3) most importantly, it argues that the black-white color line would again re-emerge if Latinos and Asians become integrated in the white category as her study found that multiracial Asians and Latinos are closer to whites than to blacks.

Since this topic is closely related to my own research interest, naturally I have a number of questions I would like to raise. I will name a few:

1) Professor Lee's paper, especially the interview section, builds the argument that multiracial Asians tend to identify themselves more with whites. Though this thesis is compelling, it is important as well to note the diversity among multiracial Asian-Americans. Even given her limited space, it would be preferable that she present some cases that contrast her thesis from her interview data, in order to convey that this diversity is present.

2) There is a logical difference between how a minority member identifies herself or himself and how he or she is accepted and integrated into the white mainstream society. In other words, even though some multiracial Asians may identify themselves with whites, it does not automatically follow that they are closer to whites than to blacks in terms of their treatment at the hands of society at large. They may face discrimination or marginalization more closely resembling that of non-white groups, even as they identify themselves as white.

3) My third comment is with regard to the color line in the U. S. The location of the color line seems to dramatically shift depending on what aspect of American society one examines. If one looks at higher education, the color line is between whites/Asians and blacks/Latinos. If one looks at the art world, as I will elaborate upon in a moment, it is between whites and non-whites.

4) My final comment deals with the "forever foreigner" stereotype that Asian Americans experience. According to the 2000 census, two thirds of people of Asian descent are foreign-born, and there is no indication at present that this proportion will shift significantly in the near future. Partially as a result of this demographic reality, the "forever foreigners" stereotype has become among the most persistent that Asian Americans experience. If mass migration from Asia continues, the forever foreigner stereotype is likely to work against Asian

Americans' likelihood of being incorporated into the white category. The identity of multiracial Americans is often strongly affected by how others identify them. It is not unusual that even among siblings, one's racial identity is completely different from that of the other depending on how each looks. Therefore, this stereotype may make it even more challenging for multiracial Asian Americans who identify themselves as white to be perceived that way in the wider U. S. society.

In my oral presentation at the 2008 NASSS, I addressed some of these points by sharing my own research findings from one of my current projects that investigates the issue of Asian American identity among Asian American artists.<sup>1</sup> I will omit the main portion on my own work here as I plan to publish it elsewhere. The following is part of the essence of my findings.

Among the all artists I interviewed, there seems to be actually nobody whose art is unrelated to his or her racial and ethnic identity. Even some successful young artists who are known for their universalist oriented work have been influenced by race and ethnicity, as their works developed out of their upbringings rooted in racial and ethnic terms.

The issue of race seems to be suppressed, marginalized, and discouraged from being visible in the white dominated art field after the shift from multiculturalism. And even multiculturalism was only recognized and celebrated up to certain extent. There is undeniably a social reality of race in mainstream American society, and it does manifest in Asian American arts now, too, though only in subtle and modest, and often secretly embedded ways.

## Notes

- 1 The project is primarily based on the personal interviews I conducted so far with 31 Asian American artists and ten curators in six regions including New York, Los Angeles, the Bay Area, and Seattle, with special attention given to the young artists and curators who took part in the exhibition entitled *One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now*, organized by the Asia Society in New York during the Fall of 2006, which traveled around the nation until the summer of 2008. Please see Yasuko Takezawa, "Race and Identities in the Post-Multiculturalism Era: Self-Representations among Asian American Artists," (in Japanese) in Takezawa ed. *Jinshu no Hyosho to Shakaiteki Realitei* (Representations of Race and Social Reality), Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten. 2009. The English version will be available later.